

English Actors
Their Characteristics and
their Methods

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A Discourse by HENRY IRVING
Delivered in the University Schools
at Oxford, on Saturday
June 26, 1886



Oxford
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS
1886

MR VICE-CHANCELLOR, PROCTORS,
LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN,—When I was
honoured by a request to deliver an
address before the members of this great
University, I explained that I could only
say something about my own calling, for *Introductory*
that I knew little or nothing about any-
thing else. I trust, however, that this con-
fession of the limitations of my know-
ledge will not prejudice me in your eyes,
members as you are—privileged mem-
bers I may say—of this seat of learning.
In an age when so many persons think
they know everything, it may afford a not
unpleasing variety to meet with some
who know that they know nothing.

I cannot discourse to you, even if you
wished me to do so, of the respective

merits of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, for if I did, I should not be able to tell you anything that you do not know already. I have not had the advantage—one that very few of the members of my profession in past, or even in present times have enjoyed—of an University education. The only *Alma Mater* I ever knew was the hard stage of a country theatre.

*An earlier
visit*

In the course of my training, long before I had taken what I may call my degree in London, I came to act in your city of Oxford. I have a very pleasant recollection of the time I passed here, though I am sorry to say that, owing to the regulation which forbade theatrical performances during term time, I saw Oxford only in vacation, which is rather like—to use the old illustration—seeing *Hamlet* with the part of Hamlet left out. There was then no other building available for dramatic representations than the Town Hall. I may, perhaps, be allowed to congratulate you on the ex-

WHAT THE THEATRE SHOULD BE 3

cellent theatre which you now possess—I do not mean the Sheldonian—and at the same time to express a hope that, as a more liberal—and might I say a wiser?—*régime* allows the members of the University to go to the play, they will not receive any greater moral injury, or be distracted any more from their studies, than when they were only allowed the occasional relaxation of hearing comic songs. Macready once said that ‘a theatre was a place of recreation for the sober-minded and intelligent.’ I trust that, under whatsoever management the theatre in Oxford may be, it will always deserve this character

*Recreation
for the sober
minded*

You must not expect any learned disquisition from me, nor even in the modified sense in which the word is used among you will I venture to style what I am going to say to you a lecture. You may, by the way, have seen a report that I was cast for *four* lectures, but I assure you there was no ground for such an alarming rumour, a rumour

4 *HISTORY OF THE STAGE*

quite as alarming to me as it could have been to you. What I do propose is to say to you something about four of our greatest actors in the past, each of whom may be termed the representative of an important period in the annals of our national drama.

*Edmund
Kean*

In turning over the leaves of a history of the life of Edmund Kean I came across the following sentence (the writer is speaking of Edmund Kean as having restored nature to the stage) —‘There seems always to have been this alternation between the schools of nature and art (if we may so term them) in the annals of the English theatre.’ Now if for *art* I may be allowed to substitute *artificiality*, which is what the author really meant, I think that his sentence is an epitome of the history of our stage, and it struck me at once that I could not select anything more appropriate—I will not say as a text, for that sounds as if I were going to deliver you a sermon—but as the theme, or *motif* of

the remarks I am about to address to you. The four actors of whom I shall attempt to tell you something—Burbage, Betterton, Garrick, and Kean—were the *four* greatest champions, in their respective times on the stage, of nature in contradistinction to artificiality.

When we consider the origin of the drama, or perhaps I should say of the higher class of drama, we see that the style of acting must necessarily have been artificial rather than natural. Take the Greek tragedy, for instance, the actors, as you know, wore masks, and had to speak, or rather intone, in a theatre more than half open to the air, and therefore it was impossible they could employ facial expression, or much variety of intonation. We have not time now to trace at length the many vicissitudes in the career of the drama, but I may say that Shakespeare was the first dramatist who dared to rob Tragedy of her stilts, and who successfully introduced an element of comedy which was not diaggd

*Early acting
artificial*

*Shakespeare
the champion
of nature*

in by the neck and heels, but which naturally evolved itself from the treatment of the tragic story, and did not violate the consistency of any character

*Effect of
versification*

It was not only with regard to the *writing* of his plays that Shakespeare sought to fight the battle of nature against artificiality. However naturally he might write, the affected or monotonous *delivery* of his verse by the actors would neutralise all his efforts. The old rhyming ten-syllable lines could not but lead to a monotonous mode of elocution, nor was the early blank verse a great improvement in this respect, but Shakespeare fitted his blank verse to the natural expression of his ideas, and not his ideas to the trammels of his verse.

In order to carry out these reforms, in order to dethrone artifice and affectation, he needed the help of actors in whom he could trust, and especially of a leading actor who could interpret his greatest dramatic creations, such a one he found in Richard Burbage

SHAKESPEARE AND BURBAGE 7

Shakespeare came to London in 1585. Whether on this, his first visit, he became connected with the theatres is uncertain. At any rate it is most probable that he saw Burbage in some of his favourite characters, and perhaps made his acquaintance, being first employed as a kind of servant in the theatre, and afterwards as a player of inferior parts. It was not until about 1591-1592 that Shakespeare began to turn his attention seriously to dramatic authorship. For five years of his life we are absolutely without any evidence as to what were his pursuits. But there can be little doubt that during this interval he was virtually undergoing that special education, consisting rather of the study of human nature, than that of books, and was acquiring the art of dramatic construction—learnt better in a theatre, I should think, than anywhere else.

*Richard
Burbage*

Unfortunately, we have no record of the intercourse between Shakespeare and Burbage, but there can be little doubt

*Shakespeare
as the Ghost*

that between the dramatist, who was himself an actor, and the actor who gave life to the greatest creations of his imagination, and who, probably, amazed no less than delighted the great master by the vividness and power of his impersonations, there must have existed a close friendship. Shakespeare, unlike most men of genius, was no bad man of business, and, indeed, a friend of mine who prides himself upon being practical, once suggested that he selected the part of the Ghost in *Hamlet* because it enabled him to go in front of the house between the acts and count the money. Burbage was universally acknowledged as the greatest tragic actor of his time. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Ben Jonson uses Burbage's name as a synonym for 'the best actor', and Bishop Corbet, in his *Iter Boreale*, tells us that his host at Leicester—

'when he would have said King Richard died,
And call'd, "A horse! A horse!" he, Burbage,
cried'

In a scene, in which Burbage and the comedian Kemp (the J L Toole of the Shakespearean period) are introduced in *The Return from Parnassus*—a satirical play, as you may know, written by some of the members of St John's College, Cambridge, for performance by themselves on New Year's Day, 1602—we have proof of the high estimation in which the great actor was held Kemp says to the scholars who are anxious to try their fortunes on the stage —‘But be merry, my lads, you have happened upon the most excellent vocation in the world for money, they come north and south to bring it to our playhouse, and for honours, who of more report than Dick Burbage and Will Kemp? he is not counted a gentleman that knowes not Dick Burbage and Will Kemp, there's not a country wench that can dance “Sellenger's Round” but can talke of Dick Burbage and Will Kemp’

*Return from
Parnassus*

That Burbage's fame as an actor outlived his life may be seen from the

Flecknoe

description given by Flecknoe — 'He was a delightful Proteus, so wholly transforming himself into his part, and putting off himself with his clothes, as he never (not so much as in the 'tiring house) assumed himself again until the play was done * * * (He had all the parts of an excellent orator, animating his words with speaking, and speech with acting, his auditors being never more delighted than when he spake, nor more sorry than when he held his peace Yet even then he was an excellent actor still, never failing in his part when he had done speaking, but with his looks and gestures maintaining it still to the height')

It is not my intention, even if time permitted, to go much into the private life of the four actors of whom I propose to speak Very little is known of Burbage's private life, perhaps Shakespeare and he may have been drawn nearer together by the tie of a common sorrow, for, as the poet lost

his beloved son Hamnet when quite a child, so did Burbage lose his eldest son Richard Burbage died on March 13th, 1617, being then about fifty years of age Camden, in his *Annals of James I*, records his death, and calls him a second Roscius He was sincerely mourned by all those who loved the dramatic art, and he numbered among his friends such 'common players' as Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher, and others whose names were destined to become the most honoured in the annals of English literature Burbage was the first great actor that England ever saw, the original representative of many of Shakespeare's noblest creations, among others, of Shylock, Richard, Romeo, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, and Macbeth We may fairly conclude Burbage's acting to have had all the best characteristics of natural, as opposed to artificial acting The principles of the former are so clearly laid down by Shakespeare, in Hamlet's advice to the players, that, per-

*Death of
Burbage*

haps, I cannot do better than repeat them —

*Hamlet,
Act III,
Scene 2*

‘Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue, but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious, periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb show and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o’erdoing Termagant, it out-herods Herod. Pray you, avoid it. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor; suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature, for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the

unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve, the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely that neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably'

When we try to picture what the theatre in Shakespeare's time was like, it strikes us that it must have been difficult to carry out those principles To our mind it must have been almost impossible for the actors to keep up the illusion of the play, surrounded as they were by many distracting elements Figure to yourselves a crowd of fops, chattering like a flock of daws, carrying their stools in their hands, and settling around and sometimes upon the stage itself, with as much noise as possible To vindicate their importance in their own eyes they kept up a constant

Acting
under diffi-
culties

jangling of petty carping criticism on the actors and the play. In the intervals of repose which they allowed their tongues, they ogled the ladies in the boxes, and made a point of vindicating the dignity of their intellects by being always most inattentive during the most pathetic portions of the play. In front of the house matters were little better, the orange girls going to and fro among the audience, interchanging jokes—not of the most delicate character—with the young sparks and apprentices, the latter cracking nuts or howling down some unfortunate actor who had offended their worships, sometimes pipes of tobacco were being smoked. Picture all this confusion, and add the fact that the female characters of the play were represented by shrill-voiced lads or half-shaven men. There is a story told of Charles I, when about to witness the play of *Othello*. The performance was late, and when the King asked impatiently why the actors did not begin, ‘May it please you, sire,’

*Female
characters*

was the reply, 'Desdemona is just being shaved' Imagine an actor having to invest such representatives as half-shaven men, with the womanly tenderness of a Desdemona, the girlish passion of a Juliet, or the pitiable anguish of a distraught Ophelia, and you cannot but realise how difficult under such circumstances *great* acting must have been. In fact, while we are awe-struck by the wonderful intellectuality of the best dramas of the Elizabethan period, we cannot help feeling that certain subtleties of acting, elaborate by-play, for instance, and the finer lights and shades of intonation, must have been impossible. Recitation rather than impersonation would be aimed at generally by the actors.

Thomas Betterton was the son of one of the cooks of King Charles I. He was born in Tothill Street, Westminster, about 1635, eighteen years after the death of Burbage. He seems to have received a fair education, indeed, but for the disturbing effect of the Civil War, he would

*Birth of
Betterton*

probably have been brought up to one of the liberal professions. He was, however, apprenticed to a bookseller, who, fortunately for Betterton, took to theatrical management. Betterton was about twenty-four years old when he began his dramatic career. For upwards of fifty years he seems to have held his position as the foremost actor of the day. It was fortunate, indeed, for the interests of the drama that so great an actor arose at the very time when dramatic art had, as it were, to be resuscitated. As soon as the Puritans (who hated the stage and everyone connected with it as heartily as they hated their Cavalier neighbours) came into power they abolished the theatres, as they did every other form of intellectual amusement, and for many years the drama only existed in the form of a few vulgar 'drolls'. It must have been, indeed, a dismal time for the people of England, with all the horrors of civil war fresh in their memory, the more than paternal government allowed its subjects

*Betterton's
England*

no other amusement than that of consigning their neighbours to eternal damnation, and of selecting for themselves—by anticipation—all the best reserved seats in heaven. When the Restoration took place the inevitable reaction followed. Society, having been condemned to a lengthened period of an involuntary piety—which sat anything but easily on it—rushed into the other extreme, all who wanted to be in the fashion professed but little morality, and it is to be feared that, for once in a way, their practice did not come short of their profession. Now was the time when, instead of ‘poor players,’ ‘fine gentlemen’ condescended to write for the stage, and it may be remarked that, as long as the literary interests of the theatre were in their keeping, the tone of the plays represented was more corrupt than it ever was at any other period of the history of the drama. It is something to be thankful for that at such a time, when the highly flavoured comedies of Wycherley and

*The lowest
deep*

*Betterton's
versatility*

Congreve were all the vogue, and when the monotonous profligacy of nearly all the characters introduced into those plays was calculated to encourage the most artificial style of acting—it was something, I say, to be thankful for, that at such a time Betterton and one or two other actors could infuse life into the noblest creations of Shakespeare. Owing, more especially, to Betterton's great powers the tragedy of *Hamlet* held its own in popularity, even against such witty productions as *Love for Love*. It was also fortunate that the same actor, who could draw tears as Hamlet, was equally at home in the feigned madness of that amusing rake Valentine, or in the somewhat coarse humour of Sir John Brute. By charming the public in what were the popular novelties of the day, he was able to command their support when he sought it for a nobler form of drama. He married an actress, Mrs Saunderson, who was only inferior in her art to her husband. Their married life seems to

have been one of perfect happiness. When one hears so much of the profligacy of actors and actresses, it is pleasant to think of this couple, in an age proverbial for its immorality, in a city where the highest in rank set an example of shameless licence, living their quiet, pure, artistic life, respected and beloved by all that knew them.

Betterton had few physical advantages. If we are to believe Antony Aston, one of his contemporaries, he had 'a short thick neck, stooped in the shoulders, and had fat short arms, which he rarely lifted higher than his stomach. His left hand frequently lodged in his breast, between his coat and waistcoat, while with his right he prepared his speech' Yet the same critic is obliged to confess that, at seventy years of age, a younger man might have *personated*, but could not have *acted*, Hamlet better. He calls his voice 'low and grumbling,' but confesses that he had such power over it that he could enforce attention.

even from fops and orange girls I dare say you all know how Steele and Addison admired his acting, and how enthusiastically they spoke of it in *The Tatler*. The latter writes eloquently of the wonderful agony of jealousy and the tenderness of love which he showed in *Othello*, and of the immense effect he produced in *Hamlet*.

Pepys' testimony to Betterton

Betterton, like all really great men, was a hard worker. Pepys says of him, 'Betterton is a very sober, serious man, and studious, and humble, following of his studies, and is rich already with what he gets and saves.' Alas! the fortune so hardly earned was lost in an unlucky moment. He intrusted it to a friend to invest in a commercial venture in the East Indies, which failed most signally. Betterton never reproached his friend, he never murmured at his ill-luck. The friend's daughter was left unprovided for; but Betterton adopted the child, educated her for the stage, and she became an actress of merit,

Betterton's losses

and married Bowman, the player, afterwards known as 'The Father of the Stage'

In Betterton's day there were no long runs of pieces, but, had his lot been cast in these times, he might have been compelled to perform, say, Hamlet for 300 nights or 400 nights, for the rights of the majority are entitled to respect in other affairs besides politics, and if the theatre going public demand a play (and our largest theatres only hold a limited number) the manager dare not cause annoyance and disappointment by withdrawing it

Like Edmund Kean, Betterton may *His death* be said to have died upon the stage, for in April, 1710, when he took his last benefit as Melantius, in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy* (an adaptation of which, by the way, was played by Macready under the title of *The Bridal*), he was suffering tortures from gout, and had almost to be carried to his dressing-room, and though he acted the part

with all his old fire, speaking these very appropriate words—

‘ My heart
And limbs are still the same, my will as great,
To do you service,’

within forty-eight hours he was dead
He was buried in the Cloisters of Westminster Abbey with every mark of respect and honour

Scenery

I may here add that the censure said to have been directed against Bettlerton for the introduction of scenery is the prototype of that cry, which we hear so often nowadays, against over-elaboration in the arrangements of the stage. If it be a crime against good taste to endeavour to enlist every art in the service of the stage, and to heighten the effect of noble poetry by surrounding it with the most beautiful and appropriate accessories, I myself must plead guilty to that charge, but I should like to point out that every dramatist who has ever lived, from Shakespeare downwards, has always endeavoured to get his plays put

upon the stage with as good effect and as handsome appointments as possible. Indeed, the Globe Theatre was burned down during the first performance of *Henry VIII*, through the firing off of a cannon which announced the arrival of King Henry. Perhaps, indeed, some might regard this as a judgment against the manager for such an attempt at realism.

Shakespeare's view

It was seriously suggested to me by an enthusiast the other day that costumes of Shakespeare's time should be used for all Shakespeare's plays. I reflected a little on the suggestion, and then I put it to him whether the characters in *Julius Caesar* or in *Antony and Cleopatra*, dressed in doublet and hose, would not look rather out of place. He answered, 'He had never thought of that.' In fact, difficulties almost innumerable must invariably crop up if we attempt to represent plays without appropriate costume and scenery, the aim of which is to realise the *locale* of

Costume

*Analogy of
painting*

the action Some people may hold that paying attention to such matters necessitates inattention to the acting, but the majority think it does not, and I believe that they are right What would Alma Tadema say, for instance, if it were proposed to him that in a picture of the Roman Amphitheatre the figures should be painted in the costume of Spain? I do not think he would see the point of such a noble disregard of detail, and why should he, unless what is false in art is held to be higher than what is true?

*An inter
regnum*

Little more than thirty years was to elapse between the death of the honoured Betterton and the appearance of David Garrick, who was to restore Nature once more to the stage In this comparatively short interval progress in dramatic affairs had been all backward Shakespeare's advice to the actors had been neglected, earnest passion, affecting pathos, ever-varying gestures, telling intonation of voice, and, above all, that complete

identification of themselves in the part they represented—all these qualities, which had distinguished the acting of Betterton, had given way to noisy rant, formal and affected attitudes, and a heavy stilted style of declamation. Betterton died in 1710, and six years after, in 1716, Garrick was born. About twenty years after, in 1737, Samuel Johnson and his friend and pupil, David Garrick, set out from Lichfield on their way to London. In spite of the difference in their ages, and their relation of master and pupil, a hearty friendship had sprung up between them, and one destined, in spite of Johnson's occasional resentment at the actor's success in life, to last till it was ended by the grave.

*Birth of
Garrick*

Much of Johnson's occasional harshness and almost contemptuous attitude towards Garrick was, I fear, the result of the consciousness that his old pupil had thoroughly succeeded in life, and had reached the highest goal possible in the career which he had chosen, while he

*Garrick and
Johnson*

himself, though looked up to as the greatest scholar of his time, was conscious, as he shows us in his own reflections, of how much more he might have done but for his constitutional indolence

*Garrick's
descent*

Garrick's family was of French origin, his father having come over to England during the persecution of the Huguenots in 1687, and on his mother's side he had Irish blood in his veins, so that by descent he was a combination of French, English, and Irish, a combination by no means unpromising for one who was destined to be an actor

On reaching London, Garrick enrolled his name in Lincoln's Inn, and was looking about him 'to see' what would turn up, when the news of his father's death reached him. There is no doubt that, if Garrick had consulted his own wishes only, he would at once have gone upon the stage. But fortunately, perhaps, for his future career, he could not bear to grieve his mother's heart by adopting at once, and at such a time,

when she was crushed with sorrow for her loss, a calling which he knew she detested so heartily

Within a year Mrs Garrick followed to the grave the husband whom she never ceased to mourn, and David had nothing more to face than the prejudices of his brother Peter, and of his sisters, if he should resolve ultimately to adopt the profession on which his heart was fixed

It was not, however, till nearly three years after, in 1741, that Garrick determined to take the decisive step, first feeling his way by playing Chamont, and Sir Harry Wildair, at Ipswich, where he appeared under the name of Mr Lydall, and under this same name, in the same year, he made his first appearance at Goodman's-fields Theatre, in the part of Richard III. His success was marvellous. Considering the small experience he had had, no actor ever made such a successful *début*. No doubt by waiting and exercising his

*His first
appearance*

*Carriek's
swift success*

*Quin and
Horace Wal-
pole dissent*

powers of observation, and by studying many parts in private, he had, to a certain extent, matured his powers. But making allowance for all his great natural gifts, there is no denying that Garrick, in one leap, gained a position which, in the case of most other actors, has only been reached through years of toil. He seems to have charmed all classes, the learned and the ignorant, the cultured and the vulgar, great statesmen, poets, and even the fribbles of fashion were all nearly unanimous in his praise. The dissentient voices were so few that they were drowned in the clamours of applause. Quin might snarl and growl, and Horace Walpole, who seems to have grown alarmed at so much of the incense of praise finding its way to the nostrils of another, might give vent to a few feeble sneers, such as when he said, 'I do not mention the things written in his praise, because he writes most of them himself.' But the battle was won. Nature in the place of artificiality, ori-

ginality in the place of conventionality, had triumphed on the stage once more

Consternation reigned in the home at Lichfield when the news arrived that brother David had become a play-actor, but ultimately the family were reconciled to such degradation by the substantial results of the experiment. Such reconcilements are not uncommon. Some young man of good birth and position has taken to the stage. His family, who could not afford to keep him, have been shocked, and in pious horror have cast him out of their respectable circle, but at last success has come, and they have managed to overcome their scruples and prejudices, and to profit by the harvest which the actor has reaped.

Garrick seems to have continued playing under the name of Lydall for two months, though the secret must have been an open one. It was not till December 2, the night of his benefit, that he was at last announced under his own

Mr Lydall

name, and henceforward his career was one long triumph, chequered, indeed, by disagreements, quarrels, and heart-burnings (for Garrick was extremely sensitive), caused, for the most part, by the envy and jealousy which invariably dog the heels of success

*Garrick
over
sensitive*

Second-rate actors, like Theophilus Cibber, or gnats such as Murphy and others, easily stung him. He was lampooned as 'The Sick Monkey' on his return to the stage after having taken a much-needed rest. But discretion and audacity seldom go hand-in-hand, and the self-satisfied satiriser generally overshoots the mark. Garrick was ever ready with 'a reply to his assailants' when Dr Hill attacked his pronunciation, saying that he pronounced his 'i's' as if they were 'u's,' Garrick answered—

'If 'tis true, as you say, that I've injured a letter,
I'll change my note soon, and I hope for the
better

May the just right of letters as well as of men,
Hereafter be fixed by the tongue and the pen

Most devoutly I wish that they both have their due,
And that *I* may be never mistaken for *U*'

Comparing Garrick with Betterton, it must be remembered that the former was more exposed to the attacks of envy from the very universality of his success. Never was a man in any profession, perhaps, that combined so many various qualities. A fair poet, a most fluent correspondent, an admirable conversationalist, possessing a person of singular grace, a voice of marvellous expressiveness, and a disposition so mercurial and vivacious as is rarely found in any Englishman, he was destined to be a great social as well as a great artistic success. He loved the society of men of birth and fashion, he seems to have had a more passionate desire to please in private even than in public, and almost to have justified the often-quoted couplet in Goldsmith's *Retaliation* —

*Betterton
and Garrick*

Goldsmith

'On the stage he was natural, simple, affecting,
'I was only that when he was off he was acting'

Some men, envious of the substantial fortune which he realised by almost incessant hard work, by thorough good principle with regard to money, and by a noble, not a paltry economy, might call him mean, though many of them knew well, from their own experience, that his nature was truly generous—his purse, as well as his heart, ever open to a friend, however little he might deserve it. Yet they sneered at his want of reckless extravagance, and called him a miser. The worst offender in this respect was Samuel Foote, a man of great accomplishments, witty, but always ill-natured. It is difficult to speak of Foote's conduct to Garrick in any moderate language. Mr Forster may assert that behind Foote's brutal jests there always lurked a kindly feeling, but what can we think of the man who, constantly receiving favours from Garrick's hand, could never speak of him before others without a sneer, who, the moment he had received the loan of

*Samuel
Foote*

money or other favour for which he had cringed, snarled—I will not say like a dog, for no dog is so ungrateful—snapped at the hand which had administered to him of its bounty? When this man, who had never spared a friend, whose whole life had been passed in maligning others, at last was himself the victim of a vile and cruel slander, Garrick forgot the gibes and sneers of which Foote had made him so often the victim, and stood by him with a noble devotion as honourable to himself as it was ill deserved by its object. Time would not suffice, had I as many hours as I have minutes before me, to tell you of all the acts of generosity that this mean man, this niggardly actor, performed in his lifetime. One characteristic anecdote will suffice. When Whitfield was building his Tabernacle in Tottenham Court Road, he employed one of the carpenters who worked for Garrick at Drury Lane. Subscriptions for the Tabernacle do not seem to have

*Garrick's
generosity*

Whitfield

come in as fast as they were required to pay the workmen, so that the carpenter had to go to Garrick to ask for an advance. When pressed for his reason, he confessed that he had not received any wages from Mr Whitfield. Garrick made the advance asked for, and soon after quietly set out to pay a visit to Mr Whitfield, when, with many apologies for the liberty he was taking, he offered him a five-hundred pound bank-note as his subscription towards the Tabernacle. Considering that Garrick had no particular sympathy with Nonconformists, this action speaks as much for his charity as a Christian as it does for his liberality as a man.

Richard III Perhaps Richard III remained Garrick's best Shakespearian character. Of course he played Cibber's version and not Shakespeare's. In fact, many of the Shakespearian parts were not played from the poet's own text, but Garrick might have doubted whether even his popularity would have reconciled his

audiences to the unadulterated poetry of our greatest dramatist. His style of acting was eminently natural, as we may gather from the story told by Boswell. Dr Johnson was discussing plays and players with Mrs Siddons, and he said *Dr Johnson* 'Garrick, Madam, was no declaimer, there was not one of his own scene-shifters who could not have spoken "To be or not to be" better than he did.' A true conception of character and natural expression of it were his distinguished excellences.

Next to Richard, Lear would seem to *Lear* have been Garrick's best Shakespearian performance. In Hamlet and Othello he *Hamlet* did not equal Betterton, and in the latter, certainly from all one can discover, he was infinitely surpassed by Edmund Kean. In fact, Othello was *Othello* not one of his great parts. But in the wide range of characters which he undertook, Garrick was probably never equalled. A poor actor named Everard, who was first brought out as a boy by Garrick,

*Garrick's
versatility*

says—'Such or such an actor in their respective *fortes* have been allowed to play such or such a part equally well as he, but could they perform Archer and Scrub like him? and Abel Drugger, Ranger, and Bayes, and Benedick, speak his own prologue to *Barbarossa*, in the character of a country boy, and in a few minutes transform himself in the same play to Selim? Nay, in the same night he has played Sir John Brute and the Guardian, Romeo and Lord Chalkstone, Hamlet and Sharp, King Lear and Fribble, King Richard and the School-boy! Could any one but himself attempt such a wonderful variety, such an amazing contrast of character, and be equally great in all? No, no, no! "Garrick, take the chair!"

Garrick was, without doubt, a very intense actor, he threw himself most thoroughly into any part that he was playing, and certainly we know that he was not wanting in reverence for Shakespeare. In spite of the liberties which

GARRICK AND SHAKESPEARE 37

he ventured to take with the poet's text, he loved and worshipped him To Powell, who threatened to be at one time a formidable rival, his advice was, 'Never let your Shakespeare be out of your hands, keep him about you as a charm, the more you read him, the more you will like him, and the better you will act' As to his yielding to the popular taste for pantomime and spectacle, he may plead a justification in the words which his friend Johnson put into his mouth in the prologue that he wrote for the inauguration of his management at Drury Lane —

His appreciation of Shakespeare

'The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
And we, who live to please, must please to live'

We must remember how much he did for the stage Though his alterations of Shakespeare shock us, they are nothing to those outrages committed by others, who deformed the poet beyond recognition Garrick made Shakespeare's plays once more popular He purged the

*Garrick's
services to
the stage*

actors, for a time at least, of faults that were fatal to any high class of drama, and, above all, he gradually got rid of those abominable nuisances (to which we have already alluded) the people who came and took their seats at the wings, on the stage itself, while the performances were going on, hampering the efforts of the actors and actresses. The stage would have had much to thank Garrick for if he had done nothing more than this—if only that he was the first manager who kept the audience where they ought to be, on the other side of the footlights.

*His private
life*

In his private life Garrick was most happy. He was fortunate enough to find for his wife a simple-minded loyal woman, in a quarter which some people would deem very unpromising. Mrs Garrick was, as is well known, a celebrated *danseuse*, known as M^{lle} Violette, whose real name was Eva Maria Weigel, a Viennese. A more affectionate couple was never seen, they were not

blessed with children, but they lived together in the most uninterrupted happiness, and their house was the scene of many social gatherings of a delightful kind Mrs Garrick survived her husband, and lived to the ripe age of ninety eight, retaining to the very last much of that grace and charm of expression which had won the actor's heart

On returning to London, after a visit to the Spencers, at Althorp, in January, 1779, he was struck down by a fatal attack of his old malady, the gout, and died at the age of sixty-three

*Garrick's
death*

He was buried in Westminster Abbey with ceremonies as imposing as ever graced the funeral of a great man The pall-bearers were headed by the Duke of Devonshire and Earl Spencer, while round the grave there were gathered such men as Burke and Fox, and last, not least, his old friend and tutor, Samuel Johnson, his rugged countenance streaming with tears, his noble heart filled with the sincerest grief The

and burial

words so often quoted, artificial though they may seem, came from that heart when, speaking of his dear Davy's death, he said that it 'had eclipsed the gaiety of nations'

Garrick's remarkable success in society, which achieved for him a position only inferior to that he achieved on the stage, is the best answer to what is often talked about the degrading nature of the actor's profession. Since the days of Roscius no contempt for actors in general, or for their art, has prevented a great actor from attaining that position which is accorded to all distinguished in what are held to be the higher arts.

*Garrick's
successor*

Nearly nine years after the death of Garrick, on November 4th, 1787, a young woman, who had run away from home when little more than a child to join a company of strolling players, and who, when that occupation failed, earned a scanty living as a hawker in the streets of London, gave birth, in a wretched room near Gray's Inn, to an illegitimate

child This woman was Nance Carey, the granddaughter of Henry Carey, the author of the National Anthem She was the great granddaughter of George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, whose natural son Henry Carey was A compassionate actress, Miss Tidswell, who knew the father of the child, Aaron Kean, gave her what assistance she could Poor Nance was removed to her father's lodgings, near Gray's Inn, and there, on the day above mentioned, Edmund Kean was born Three months after his birth his mother deserted him, leaving him without a word of apology or regret, to the care of the woman who had befriended her in her trouble When he was but three years old he was brought, amongst a number of other children, to Michael Kelly, who was then bringing out the opera of *Cymon* at the Opera House in the Haymarket, and, thanks to his personal beauty, he was selected for the part of Cupid Shortly afterwards he found his way to Drury

Birth of Edmund Kean

Kean's debut

Lane, where the handsome baby, for he was little more, figured among the imps in the pantomime. Taught here the tricks of the acrobat, at four years old he had acquired such powers of contortion that he was fit to rank as an infant phenomenon. But the usual result followed: the little limbs became deformed, and had to be put in irons, by means of which they regained that symmetry with which Nature had at first endowed them.

*Kemble and
Kean*

Three years afterwards, in March, 1794, John Kemble was acting Macbeth in Drury Lane, and, in the cauldron scene, he engaged some children to personate the supernatural beings summoned by the witches from that weird vessel. Little Edmund with his irons was the cause of a ridiculous accident, and the attempt to embody the ghostly forms was abruptly abandoned. But Edmund seems to have been pardoned for his blunder, and for a short time was permitted by the manager to appear in one or two children's parts, and little did the

dignified manager imagine that the child—who was one of his cauldron of imps in *Macbeth*—was to become, twenty years later, his very formidable rival

In Orange Court, Leicester Square, where Holcroft, the author of *The Road to Ruin*, was born, Edmund Kean received his first education. Scanty enough it was, for it had scarcely begun before his wretched mother stepped in and claimed him, and, after her reappearance, his education seems to have been of a most spasmodic character. Hitherto, the child's experience of life had been hard enough. When only eight years of age he ran away to Portsmouth, and shipped himself on board a vessel bound to Madeira. But he found his new life harder than that from which he had escaped, and, by dint of feigning deafness and lameness, he succeeded in procuring his removal to a hospital at Madeira, whence, the doctors finding his case yielded to no remedies, the authorities kindly shipped him again to England

*Kean's sea
faring life*

He insisted on being deaf and lame, indeed, so deaf, that in a violent thunder-storm he remained perfectly unmoved, explaining his composure by declaring that he could not hear any noise at all. From Portsmouth he made his way on foot to London. On presenting himself at the wretched lodgings where his mother lived he found she had gone away with Richardson's show. Penniless and half starving he suddenly thought of his uncle, Moses Kean, who lived in Lisle Street, Leicester Square, a queer character, who gained a precarious living by giving entertainments as a mimic and ventriloquist. The uncle received his nephew warmly enough, and seems to have cultivated, to the best of his ability, the talent for acting which he recognised at once in the boy. Edmund again enjoyed a kind of desultory education, partly carried on at school and partly at his uncle's home, where he enjoyed the advantage of the kind instructions of his old friend, Miss Tidswell, of

His return

*His instruc-
tors*

D'Egville, the dancing master, of Angelo, the fencing master, and of no less a person than Incledon, the celebrated singer, who seems to have taken the greatest interest in him. But the *vagrant half,* *His va*
grancy gipsy disposition which he inherited from his mother could never be subdued, and he was constantly disappearing from his uncle's house for weeks together, which he would pass in going about from one roadside inn to another, amusing the guests with his acrobatic tricks, and his monkey-like imitations. In vain was he locked up in rooms, the height of which from the ground was such as seemed to render escape impossible. He contrived to get out somehow or other, even at the risk of his neck, and to make his escape to some fair, where he would earn a few pence by the exhibition of his varied accomplishments. During these periods of vagabondism he would live on a mere nothing, sleeping in barns, or in the open air, and would faithfully bring back his gains to Uncle Moses. But even this

astounding generosity, appealing, as it must have done, to the uncle's sentiments, could not appease him. His uncle went so far, apparently with the concurrence of Miss Tidswell, as to place round the boy's neck a brass collar with the inscription, 'This boy belongs to No 9, Lisle Street, please bring him home.'

*Drury Lane
once more*

His wandering propensities being for a time subdued, we find the little Edmund again engaged at Drury Lane, and delighting the actors in the green-room by giving recitations from *Richard the Third*, probably in imitation of Cooke. During this engagement he played Arthur to Kemble's King John and Mrs Siddons's Constance, and appears to have made a great success. Soon after this, Uncle Moses died suddenly, and young Kean was left to the severe but kindly guardianship of Miss Tidswell. We cannot follow him through all the vicissitudes of his early career. The sketch I have given of his early life—ample details of which may be found

in Mr Hawkins's admirable *Life of Edmund Kean*—will give you a sufficient idea of what he must have endured and suffered. When, years afterwards, the passionate love of Shakespeare which, without exaggeration, we may say he showed almost from his cradle, had reaped its own reward in the wonderful success which he achieved, if we find him then averse to respectable conventionality, erratic, and even dissipated in his habits, let us mercifully remember the bitter and degrading sufferings which he passed through in his childhood, and not judge too harshly the great actor. Unlike those whose lives we have hitherto considered, he knew none of the softening influences of a home, to him the very name of mother, instead of recalling every tender and affectionate feeling, was but the symbol of a vague horror, the fountain of that degradation and depravation of his nature from which no subsequent prosperity could ever redeem it.

*Effects of
early suffer-
ings*

*The strolling
player*

For many years after boyhood his life was one of continual hardship. With that unsubdued conviction of his own powers which is often the sole consolation of genius, he toiled on and bravely struggled through the sordid miseries of a strolling player's life. The road to success lies through many a thorny course, across many a dreary stretch of desert land, over many an obstacle, from which the fainting heart is often tempted to turn back. But hope, and the sense of power within, which no discouragements can subdue, inspire the struggling artist still to continue the conflict, till at last courage and perseverance meet with their just reward, and success comes. The only feeling then to which the triumphant artist may be tempted is one of good-natured contempt for those who are so ready to applaud those merits which, in the past, they were too blind to recognise. Edmund Kean was twenty-seven years old before his day of triumph came.

Without any preliminary puffs, without the flourish of trumpets, on the evening of the 26th January, 1814, soaked through with the rain, Edmund Kean slunk rather than walked in at the stage-door of Drury Lane Theatre, uncheered by one word of encouragement, and quite unnoticed. He found his way to the wretched dressing-room he shared in common with three or four other actors, as quickly as possible he exchanged his dripping clothes for the dress of Shylock, and, to the horror of his companions, took from his bundle a *black* wig—the proof of his daring rebellion against the great law of conventionality, which had always condemned Shylock to red hair. Cheered by the kindness of Bannister and Oxberry, he descended to the stage dressed, and peeped through the curtain to see a more than half empty house. Drury was waiting at the wings to give him a hearty welcome. The boxes were empty, and there were about 500 people in the pit, and a few others ‘thinly scattered

*Kean as
Shylock*

*Kean's suc-
cess*

to make up a show' Shylock was the part that he was playing, and he no sooner stepped upon the stage than the interest of the audience was excited. Nothing he did or spoke in the part was done or spoken in a conventional manner. To Bassanio's words 'Be assured you may,' his reply, 'I will be assured I may,' was given with such effect that the audience burst into applause. When the act-drop fell his success was assured, and his fellow actors, who had avoided him, now seemed disposed to congratulate him, but he shrank from their approaches. The great scene with Tubal was a revelation of such originality and of such terrible force as had not probably been seen upon those boards before. Alluding to the applause of the audience, Oxberry naively remarked, 'How the devil so few of them could kick up such a row was something marvellous!' At the end of the third act everyone was ready to pay court to him, but again he held aloof. All his thoughts were

concentrated on the great trial scene, which was coming. In that scene the wonderful variety of his acting completed his triumph. Trembling with excitement he resumed his half dried clothes, and, glad to escape, rushed home. He was in too great a state of ecstasy at first to speak, but his face told his wife that he had realised his dream—that he had appeared on the stage of Drury Lane, and that his great powers had been instantly acknowledged. With not a shadow of doubt as to his future, he exclaimed, ‘Mary, you shall ride in your carriage,’ and, taking his baby boy from the cradle and kissing him, said, ‘and Charley, my boy, you shall go to Eton’—*After the triumph*
and he did.

The time when Edmund Kean made his first appearance in London was certainly favourable for an actor of genius. For a long while the national theatre had been in a bad way, and nothing but failure had hitherto met the efforts of the Committee of Management, a

*Byron and
Kean*

committee which numbered among its members Lord Byron. When the other members of the committee, with a strange blindness to their own interests, proposed that for the present Kean's name should be removed from the bills, Byron interested himself on his behalf. 'You have a great genius among you,' he said, 'and you don't know it.' On Kean's second appearance the house was nearly doubled. Hazlitt's criticism had roused the whole body of critics, and they were all there to sit in judgment upon the new comer. His utter indifference to the audience won him their respect, and before the piece was half over the sentence of the formidable tribunal was in his favour. From that moment Kean exercised over his audiences a fascination which was probably never exercised by any other actor. Garrick was no doubt his superior in parts of high comedy. He was more polished, more vivacious, his manner more distinguished, and his versatility

Hazlitt

more striking In such parts as Coriolanus or Rolla, John Kemble excelled him; but in Shylock, in Richard, in Iago, and, above all, in Othello, it may be doubted whether Edmund Kean ever had an equal As far as one can judge from the many criticisms extant, written by the most intellectual men, and from the accounts of those who saw him in his prime, he was, to my mind—be it said without any disparagement to other great actors—the greatest genius that our stage has ever seen Unequal he may have been — perhaps often so — but there were moments in his acting which were, without exaggeration, moments of inspiration

Coleridge is reported to have said that to see Kean act was 'like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning' This often-quoted sentence embodies perhaps the main features of Edmund Kean's greatness as an actor, for, when he was impersonating the heroes of our poet, he revealed their natures by an instant

*Shal appear
by flashes of
lightning*

flash of light so searching that every minute feature, which by the ordinary light of day was hardly visible, stood bright and clear before you. The effect of such acting was, indeed, that of lightning—it appalled, the timid hid their eyes, and fashionable society shrank from such heart-piercing revelations of human passion. Persons who had schooled themselves to control their emotion till they had scarcely any emotion left to control, were repelled rather than attracted by Kean's relentless anatomy of all the strongest feelings of our nature. In *Sir Giles Overreach*, a character almost devoid of poetry, Kean's acting displayed with such powerful and relentless truth the depths of a cruel avaricious man, baffled in all his vilest schemes, that the effect he produced was absolutely awful. As no bird but the eagle can look without blinking on the sun, so none but those who, in the sacred privacy of their imaginations, had stood face to face with the mightiest

*Kean as
Sir Giles
Overreach*

storms of human passion could understand such a performance Byron was an enthusiast about Kean, whose acting of Richard is said to have inspired these lines—

‘There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear,
And where his frown of hatred darkling fell
Hope withering fled, and Mercy sigh’d farewell!’

Byron had been almost forced into a quarrel with Kean by the actor’s disregard of the ordinary courtesies of society, but at the performance of Sir Giles he could not restrain himself, and rushed behind the scenes to grasp the hand of the man to whom he felt that he owed a wonderful revelation

I might descant for hours with an enthusiasm which, perhaps, only an actor could feel on the marvellous details of Kean’s impersonations. ^{He was not a} He was not a scholar in the ordinary sense of the word, though Heaven knows he had been schooled by adversity, but I doubt

*Kean's
labours*

if there ever was an actor who so thought out his part, who so closely studied with the inward eye of the artist the waves of emotion that might have agitated the minds of the beings whom he represented. One hears of him during those early years of struggle and privation, pacing silently along the road, foot-sore and half starved, but unconscious of his own sufferings, because he was immersed in the study of those great creations of Shakespeare's genius which he was destined to endow with life upon the stage. When you read of Edmund Kean as, alas! he was later on in life, with mental and physical powers impaired, think of the description those gave of him who knew him best in his earlier years, how, amidst all the wildness and half-savage Bohemianism which the miseries of his life had ensured, he displayed, time after time, the most large hearted generosity, the tenderest kindness of which human nature is capable, think of him working with a concentrated

energy for the one object which he sought, namely, to reach the highest distinction in his calling, think of him as sparing no mental or physical labour to attain this end, an end which seemed ever fading further and further from his grasp, think of the disappointments, *His reward* the cruel mockeries of hope which, day after day, he had to encounter, and then be harsh if you can to those moral failings for which his misfortunes rather than his faults were responsible. If you are inclined to be severe, you may console yourselves with the reflection that this genius, who had given the highest intellectual pleasure to hundreds and thousands of human beings, was hounded by hypocritical sanctimoniousness out of *Banishment* his native land, and though, two years afterwards, one is glad to say, for the honour of one's country, a complete reaction took place, and his reappearance was greeted with every mark of affectionate welcome, the blow had been struck from which neither his mind nor

his body ever recovered. He lingered upon the stage, and died at the age of forty-six, after five years of suffering—almost a beggar—with only a solitary ten-pound note remaining of the large fortune his genius had realised.

*Kemble and
Kean*

It is said that Kean swept away the Kembles and their classical school of acting. He did not do that. The memory of Sarah Siddons, tragic queen of the British stage, was never to be effaced, and I would remind you that when Kean was a country actor (assured of his own powers, however unappreciated), resenting with passionate pride the idea of playing second to 'the Infant Roscius,' who was for a time the craze and idol of the hour, 'Never,' said he, 'never, I will play second to no one but to John Kemble!' 'I am certain that when his better nature had the ascendancy no one would have more generously acknowledged the merits of Kemble than Edmund Kean. It is idle to say that because his style was solemn

and slow, Kemble was not one of the greatest actors that our stage has produced. It is only those whose natures make them incapable of approbation or condemnation in artistic matters without being partizans, who, because they admired Edmund Kean, would admit no merit in John Kemble. The world of art, thank heaven, is wide enough for both, and the hearts of those who truly love art are large enough to cherish the memory of both as of men who did noble work in the profession which they adorned. Kean blended the realistic with the ideal in acting, and founded a school of which William Charles Macready was, afterwards, in England, the foremost disciple.

*Kean's
School*

Thus have we glanced, briefly enough, at four of our greatest actors, whose names are landmarks in the history of the drama in England, the greatest drama of the world. We have seen how they all carried out, by different methods, perhaps, but in the same spirit, the

*Nature and
Art*

principle that in acting nature must dominate art. But it is art that must interpret nature, and to interpret the thoughts and emotions of her mistress should be her first object, but those thoughts, those emotions, must be interpreted with grace, with dignity, and with temperance, and these, let us remember, art alone can teach.

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